

# Jeremiah – On the Wheel

## WHERE IS GOD?

She was born on 26<sup>th</sup> August 1910 in Skopje, Macedonia (modern day Serbia). She was of Albanian descent, she was born Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu. She is better known as Mother Teresa. At the age of 12 she felt the call of God on her life and knew she had to be a missionary. Aged 18 she left home to join the Sisters of Loretto, an Irish community of nuns with missions in India.

After training in Dublin, she took her vows as a nun in 1931. From 1931 to 1948 she taught at St. Mary's High School in Calcutta. The poverty of Calcutta made a deep and lasting impression on her, and in 1948 she left the convent school to work with the poorest people of the city. Relying on divine providence she started an open-air school for slum children.

Joined by volunteers, and receiving financial support she was able to extend the work. With support from the church, she started her own order called 'Missionaries of Charity' to care for those no one else would help.

In 1965 Pope Paul VI decreed that Missionaries of Charity become an International Religious Family. The work of Missionaries of Charity became internationally recognised and in 1969 became an International Association. By 1990 there were over 1 million co-workers in more than 40 countries. The work was awarded numerous awards including the Pope John XXIII Peace Prize in 1971 and the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979.

Mother Teresa became known across the world. Mother Teresa died in 1997. It turned out that over a span of almost 50 years, she had written letters to others in an astonishingly honest way. What these letters revealed was that for almost all of these 50 years she had experienced a complete disconnection from God.

They seemed to suggest, quite strongly, that she spent some of that time even doubting that God existed. Back in the beginning, on a retreat in the foothills of the Himalayas, she had said she felt Christ calling her to abandon the safety of her role at the school in Calcutta, and to go to the poorest of the poor! She had, she said, heard the voice of Jesus himself challenging her to 'Come by my light.'

At the beginning of her new work she said: “My soul at present is in perfect peace and joy.” Within two months of beginning the work she wrote to a friend: ‘What tortures of loneliness... I wonder how long will my heart suffer this?’

Five years later in 1953 she wrote to another friend: ‘Please pray, especially for me, that our Lord may show himself, for there is such terrible darkness within me, as if everything were dead. It has been like this more or less from the time I started the work.’

It would appear that these feelings never left her – even though she found a way to continue with the work. In 2008, after initially trying to suppress these letters for fear of damage to her reputation and memory, a book of more than 40 of them was published.

Some people criticised Mother Teresa for being a fraud. They accused her of using religion as simply a way to gain support for her work. The editor of the book explained that it was a written ministry of her inner life and was as important as her ministry to the poor.

Perhaps, in truth, it was gut wrenching honesty from a human being crying out for God when God seems absent. And in her case, and maybe in yours, God seemed absent for a long time!

Perhaps it raises this question: ‘What, in truth, in a normal human life, does faith look like?’

Maybe, what Mother Teresa teaches us, is that it can be something to do with faithfulness. Maybe its more to do with what’s on the inside, than anything we can see. It seems that Mother Teresa mostly did not see or feel God’s presence. But, she lived a life of extraordinary faithfulness, by anyone’s measure! Perhaps we could say that, above all else, she remained faithful to the call she was once sure she heard from God. Perhaps another way of saying that is this: She never let go in the darkness what God had taught her in the light.

How’s your faith friends?

How are you doing? How are you feeling about the presence or absence of God right now?

Jeremiah, it seems, may have experienced something similar to Mother Teresa, or perhaps it’s the other way around!

15 Then the LORD said to me: “Even if Moses and Samuel were to stand before me, my heart would not go out to this people. Send them away from my presence! Let them go! <sup>2</sup> And if they ask you, ‘Where shall we go?’ tell them, ‘This is what the LORD says:

“Those destined for death, to death;  
those for the sword, to the sword;  
those for starvation, to starvation;  
those for captivity, to captivity.’

<sup>3</sup> “I will send four kinds of destroyers against them,” declares the LORD, “the sword to kill and the dogs to drag away and the birds and the wild animals to devour and destroy. <sup>4</sup> I will make them abhorrent to all the kingdoms of the earth because of what Manasseh son of Hezekiah king of Judah did in Jerusalem.

<sup>5</sup> “Who will have pity on you, Jerusalem?  
Who will mourn for you?  
Who will stop to ask how you are?

<sup>6</sup> You have rejected me,” declares the LORD.  
“You keep on backsliding.  
So I will reach out and destroy you;  
I am tired of holding back.

<sup>7</sup> I will winnow them with a winnowing fork  
at the city gates of the land.  
I will bring bereavement and destruction on my people,  
for they have not changed their ways.

<sup>8</sup> I will make their widows more numerous  
than the sand of the sea.

At midday I will bring a destroyer  
against the mothers of their young men;  
suddenly I will bring down on them  
anguish and terror.

<sup>9</sup> The mother of seven will grow faint  
and breathe her last.

Her sun will set while it is still day;  
she will be disgraced and humiliated.

I will put the survivors to the sword  
before their enemies,”  
declares the LORD.

<sup>10</sup> Alas, my mother, that you gave me birth,  
a man with whom the whole land strives and contends!  
I have neither lent nor borrowed,  
yet everyone curses me.

<sup>11</sup> The LORD said,

“Surely I will deliver you for a good purpose;  
surely I will make your enemies plead with you  
in times of disaster and times of distress.

<sup>12</sup> “Can a man break iron—  
iron from the north—or bronze?

<sup>13</sup> “Your wealth and your treasures  
I will give as plunder, without charge,  
because of all your sins  
throughout your country.

<sup>14</sup> I will enslave you to your enemies  
in a land you do not know,  
for my anger will kindle a fire  
that will burn against you.”

<sup>15</sup> LORD, you understand;  
remember me and care for me.  
Avenge me on my persecutors.  
You are long-suffering—do not take me away;  
think of how I suffer reproach for your sake.

<sup>16</sup> When your words came, I ate them;  
they were my joy and my heart’s delight,  
for I bear your name,  
LORD God Almighty.

<sup>17</sup> I never sat in the company of revellers,  
never made merry with them;  
I sat alone because your hand was on me  
and you had filled me with indignation.

<sup>18</sup> Why is my pain unending  
and my wound grievous and incurable?  
You are to me like a deceptive brook,  
like a spring that fails.

<sup>19</sup> Therefore this is what the LORD says:

“If you repent, I will restore you  
that you may serve me;  
if you utter worthy, not worthless, words,  
you will be my spokesman.  
Let this people turn to you,  
but you must not turn to them.

<sup>20</sup> I will make you a wall to this people,  
a fortified wall of bronze;  
they will fight against you  
but will not overcome you,  
for I am with you  
to rescue and save you,”  
declares the LORD.

<sup>21</sup> “I will save you from the hands of the wicked  
and deliver you from the grasp of the cruel.

(Jeremiah 15 v 1 -21)

I don't know about you, but I find that a hard read! Jeremiah is certainly having a hard time, he is deeply discouraged.

God, it seems, from verses 1 -14, will not answer his prayer! Ever been there?

God it seems from verses 10-15, is giving Jeremiah sufferings he does not deserve.

Ever been there?

And God, it seems, refuses to reward Jeremiah for his obedience (v 16-18)

Ever been there?

God, it seems, is absent.

Ever been there?

Perhaps, we sometimes say it this way: Where is God?

Certainly for me, and I hope for you, passages like this raise some challenging questions about God. But for a moment today, we're going to focus more on what's going on for Jeremiah.

Jeremiah is struggling. Only in chapter 20 (which we read a couple of weeks ago) does he seem to struggle more. Jeremiah has been called by God. He is doing what he thinks God has asked of him and yet he is not in a good place! The people won't listen, they mock him and refuse to change their ways. God, too, it seems, has stopped listening and appears to have finally said "enough is enough!"

God, it seems has changed his mind in the past: he changed his mind when Moses appealed to him not to destroy the people, and he changed his mind and saved the people from defeat when Samuel interceded for them. (That's the story where they put up the Ebenezer stone to remember that "Thus far the Lord has helped us!") But, now God says that even if Moses or Samuel turn up and intercede for the people, he won't listen!

Following God can be hard, can't it? You follow what you believe to be God's call on your life; you live in the way that honours God as best you know how; you do what you know to be right and keep doing it, and yet God seems absent: nothing changes, life does not go to the anticipated script.

What do you do? What did Jeremiah do?

Perhaps this part of Jeremiah's story speaks about his inner life: what you can't see from the outside! How's your inner life?

What Jeremiah does is he prays! And he prays with gut wrenching honesty. Here's what I find most challenging: Jeremiah's prayer doesn't appear to have changed anything on the outside!

We know what Jeremiah didn't know when he poured his heart out to God in the way he does in this chapter. The people never listened, they eventually were invaded, and almost wholly destroyed by the Babylonians. Their brightest and their best got carried off to Babylon (that's what Daniel chapter 1 tells us). The Babylonian invasion by King Nebuchadnezzar was destruction on a monumental scale. Jeremiah lived to see it!

But when he prayed this prayer, he didn't know! What his prayer addressed and God's response addressed, was what was happening on the inside. When I am struggling I tend to talk about God. I talk to others about what God is or is not doing. I explain to others what God should be doing and isn't, or perhaps what he is doing and shouldn't be. What I mostly miss, is to talk to God!

Jeremiah talks to God! Jeremiah is scared for his life. In verse 15 he appeals to God to save him from those who don't like what he preaches. Perhaps its another way of saying: 'God you got me into this, now get me out of it!

Ever felt like saying that?

He expresses his loneliness in verse 16 & 17. Jeremiah began his ministry with enthusiasm and plunged himself into it. He not only preached the life, but he lived it! And he's the only one doing it – everyone else has chosen a different way. He's committed to God's truth, but it's a lonely business.

Ever been there?

Jeremiah expresses his hurt: 'Why is my pain unending?' (v18) Jeremiah's call was to preach God's word to the people, but the people simply would not listen! Nothing changed! That is extremely painful for a preacher, don't you think? Not only did they not listen, but they ridiculed him and persecuted him. Ever known your honest efforts for God rejected?

He expresses his anger! He accuses God of being like a deceitful brook! Perhaps that's another way of saying: God, you tricked me. You promised but you did not deliver!

Ever been there?

Truth is, we all experience these emotions and sometimes feel this way toward God, don't we? Question is, do we follow Jeremiah's example and pray them? Truth is, God is big enough, loving enough and gracious enough to take whatever we want to throw at him.

Truth is, we have nothing to fear from God. John tells us in his letter that God is love and perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. God has no desire to punish – he is love!

There is, though, a challenge, it seems to me when Jeremiah has finished his deeply honest expression of how life is for him – the prayer is not finished. In prayer God responds, God speaks. And God's desire, his heart, is to restore Jeremiah. When God speaks he invites Jeremiah to remember what he said when he called him.

He invited Jeremiah to remember in the darkness what God had spoken in the light.

Jeremiah 15 v 20

<sup>20</sup> I will make you a wall to this people,  
a fortified wall of bronze;  
they will fight against you  
but will not overcome you,  
for I am with you  
to rescue and save you,”  
declares the LORD.

Perhaps, in the place of gut wrenchingly honest prayer, we hear again the invitation of God to faithfulness and his encouragement. Perhaps what Jeremiah experienced, and in a different time and a different way Mother Teresa experienced, is that faithfulness to the call of God is a risky business.

Sometimes, faithfulness is, in truth, about nothing more than hanging onto a story and living it as best you know how. It's not about certainty; it's not about feelings; it's not about stability, or freedom from questioning. It's about embracing doubt as part of the journey. It's about living in the truth of our humanness. Living intentionally for God is demanding. Faithfulness requires resilience and honesty; honesty to ourselves and honesty before God.

Mother Teresa believed the story and chose to live faithfully within it. Jeremiah believed the story and chose to live faithfully within it. So, friends, how will you choose to live when the question you are asking is, where is God?

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